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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001519

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/REA, INR/NESA
RIYADH FOR MATTHEW TUELLER
TUNIS FOR NATALIE BROWN

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM KU
SUBJECT: (U) GRILLINGS: ROUNDS TWO AND POSSIBLY THREE

REF: A. KUWAIT 000949
1B. KUWAIT 00810

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad's Cabinet has survived a second round of grillings in the National Assembly and appears strong on the eve of a possible third. The second challenge of the year, this time against Health Minister Dr. Mohammed Al-Jarallah, came from Shiite Islamist MP Hussein Al-Qallaf. The charges leveled against Al-Jarallah all pertained to issues within the Health Ministry while under his leadership, unlike the earlier grilling of Finance Minister Mahmoud Al-Nouri, and some of the charges smacked of probable criminality. Even so, the 12-hour session on May 4 resulted in a failure to call for a vote of no-confidence against the Minister. This second grilling is another success for the Sabah Government and bodes well for the Prime Minister as calls for the grilling of Information Minister Mohammed Abulhassan increase. END SUMMARY

(U) Grilling Al-Jarallah

¶2. (SBU) The case against Health Minister Dr. Mohammed Al-Jarallah, the second ministerial grilling this year, appeared to be far stronger than the previous grilling of Finance Minister Mahmoud Al-Nouri (Ref A). The more compelling charges, from the day-long grilling on May 4, included accusations of squandering public funds, including KD 85 million (USD 280 million) in undocumented spending, a policy of reserving particular medicines only for Kuwaiti nationals, and the ministry's alleged refusal to treat a Somali expatriate with kidney failure, who later died in a local hospital.

¶3. (SBU) When the time came to call for a vote of no-confidence, despite some of the scandalous charges and a relatively weak rebuttal by Al-Jarallah, there was insufficient support to garner the ten votes necessary to move the proceedings to the next stage. (NOTE: 10 MPs, excluding the one initiating the grilling, must request a vote of no-confidence in order for a vote to be called. Passage requires a simple majority of members excluding Ministers--i.e. currently 25 of 49 MPs. END NOTE.) There are apparent reasons for this failure: Al-Jarallah is a Sunni Muslim while his accuser, Al-Qallaf, is a minority Shia and Al-Jarallah has excellent relations with many Members of Parliament, thus ensuring a foundation of support for him no matter which MP initiated the grilling. One English-language local daily went so far as to refer to the grilling as a "family-friendly housekeeping grill."

¶4. (SBU) A columnist for Al-Watan newspaper told PolOff that no one took the grilling seriously, partly because of the Sunni-Shia divide. An Al-Qabas columnist also intimated that the grilling of the Health Minister was never serious, because of Al-Jarallah's connections in Parliament. He explained that the grilling was done for purposes of "drama," as Al-Qallaf wanted to highlight problems in the ministry but had no real expectation that Al-Jarallah would be sacked.

¶5. (U) Despite the failure of the grilling, Sunni Islamist MP Dr. Dhaifallah Bou Ramya announced publicly afterwards his intention to grill the Health Minister in the next legislative term. Dr. Bou Ramya, the former head of a public maternity hospital, claimed that his focus was to pursue real reform in the country's healthcare system. He hoped to gain the support of the Islamist and tribal MPs in the National Assembly.

(U) The Case Against The Information Minister

¶6. (U) Shortly before the Al-Jarallah grilling, the three Salafi Movement (hardline Sunni Islamist) MPs, Dr. Waleed Tabatabaei, Abdullah Akhash, and Awad Barad Al-Enezi stated publicly their intention to grill Information Minister Mohammed Abulhassan (NOTE: Abulhassan is a liberal and the only Shiite in the Kuwaiti Cabinet. END NOTE.) Chief among the complaints against the Minister is Abulhassan's authorization of a music concert in Kuwait by the celebrities from the Arab music reality TV show 'Star Academy.' (NOTE: This program is a copy of a French show by the same name, which resembles the US program 'American Idol.' Kuwaiti

Bashar Al-Shatti finished second in the competition, which included contestants from throughout the Arab world, and is now a local celebrity. END NOTE.) Other charges against the Minister include permitting indecent magazines, moral corruption, an objectionable reduction in the amount of religious programming, the revocation of 150 promotions within the Ministry, as well as claims of unjustified promotions and appointments.

¶7. (SBU) The music concert, held here on May 7, has drawn the ire of many Islamists, who hold that the performance violated Kuwaiti laws and promoted indecency. Kuwaiti public opinion appears overwhelmingly supportive of the concert despite public protests outside the venue by several hundred Islamists. The Ministry of Information claims it sent supervisors to monitor the concert to ensure law and order; Shaykh Sabah, according to news reports, declared that the 'Star Academy' concert did not violate any laws. Some Islamists, however, reportedly attended the concert surreptitiously, and allegedly documented violations. This grilling, should it go forward, may have the support of all 18 Islamist MPs. Some speculate that even the five Shia MPs, four of whom are Islamists, will have difficulty-supporting fellow Shiite Abulhassan because the accusations are based on issues of Islamic morality.

¶8. (SBU) One Al-Qabas pundit told PolOff that the allegations against Abulhassan would go nowhere. He remarked that everyone knows the Islamists, case against the Information Minister has no chance of broad support in the National Assembly and he doubted whether a grilling would be initiated at all. Another columnist believes that the grilling may take place but is confident that Shaykh Sabah will be able to co-opt enough MPs to protect his Minister. Commenting that Islamist groups are trying to manipulate Kuwait's government and society to achieve their political ambitions, Arab Times Editor-in-Chief, Ahmed Al-Jarallah, wrote on 12 May that their actions are tantamount to "intellectual blackmail, which may lead to armed confrontations as in Saudi Arabia."

(SBU) Shaykh Sabah Looking Strong

¶9. (U) Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad met on May 10 with 14 Islamist MPs and several Ministers to discuss the issues surrounding the potential grilling of the Information Minister. News dailies referring to a 'reliable source' reported that Shaykh Sabah is tired of the confrontations from Parliament and wants grillings to occur only for major issues. These sources described the meeting as the Prime Minister's "last warning," and noted that Sabah would "stick to (his) decision to allow concerts in Kuwait."

¶10. (SBU) Sabah reportedly agreed on May 10 to allow the formation of a joint committee from the Ministries of Information and Islamic Affairs to define more stringent regulations for musical concerts than currently exist. This may be part of a compromise with the Islamists to allow them to save face without grilling Mohammed Abulhassan. "Reliable sources" were cited in a May 12 daily that any new Islamic restrictions on concerts, such as gender-segregated performances, are unlikely to "see the light of day."

¶11. (SBU) Some pundits are expressing their confidence that the grilling of the Information Minister will be delayed or canceled because of Sabah's firm stand. Meanwhile, some Islamist MPs, insisting that the musical concert "undermines religious values," continue to publicly commit to a grilling. Scientific Salafi MP Waleed Tabtabaei vowed to submit his charges against the Minister next week.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: It is widely accepted that Finance Minister Mahmoud Al-Nouri was saved from dismissal by Shaykh Sabah's direct intervention. At the conclusion of his grilling, few thought he had a chance of beating the no-confidence motion. In addition to accusations of blatant vote buying, one liberal columnist told PolOff that Shaykh Sabah granted citizenship to an MP's bidoon family members in exchange for his support. The Prime Minister's strong stand in that earlier case may have discouraged some MPs from going after the Health Minister.

¶13. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Sabah Al-Ahmad appears to be firmly in position to confront any further attacks on his Ministers. Another pundit told PolOff that Shaykh Sabah is savvy enough to know when and with whom to make deals to influence important votes. He explained that Sabah is able to use his position as "chief" of the tribe in this top-down patronage society to keep everyone happy while still getting his way. Crossing Sabah Al-Ahmad may mean a victory today, he explained, but when you need something important accomplished, he is the one to whom you must go. A grilling against the Information Minister may happen soon, as at least one tenacious Islamist MP has made clear his intention to press forward. Despite this threat, there is little evidence to suggest that Sabah, who himself has liberal leanings, will fail to co-opt enough MPs to protect his Minister.

